

HOLY EARTH
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Psalm 19
Matthew 6:25-29

"The heavens are telling the glory of God."
Psalm 19:1 (NRSV)

"Look at the birds. . . . Consider the lilies."
Matthew 6:26, 28 (NRSV)

Slowly, slowly they return
To the small woodland let alone
Great trees, outspreading and upright,
Apostles of the living light.

Patient as stars, they build in air
Tier after tier a timbered choir,
Stout beams upholding weightless grace
Of song, a blessing on this place.

Wendell Berry
A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems

In her new book, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on her decision to leave the life of a parish priest in the Episcopal church for a new life of teaching and writing. The move involved finding a new place to live. For the first time in their lives, she and her husband were looking for property to buy—in the Georgia countryside. His requirement was running water. Hers was being not more than ten miles from town. When they found just the right spot, with oak trees and trillium and elderberry, persimmon and blackberry and milkweed and water, she says, "I found my place on earth." And then, as she does so exquisitely, she reflects theologically.

I know plenty of people who find God most reliably in books, in buildings, and even in other people. I have found God in all of these places too, but the most reliable meeting place for me has always been the creation. I have always known where to go when my own flame was guttering. To lie with my back flat on the fragrant ground is to receive a transfusion of that same power that makes the green blade rise. To remember that I am

dirt and to dirt I shall return is to be given my life back again. Where other people see acreage, timber and soil, and river frontage, I see God's body. . . . The Creator does not live apart from creation . . . When I take a breath, God's Holy Spirit enters me. (pp. 79-80)

When I read that, it triggered a long-forgotten memory. At church camp, to which I was sent for a week in the summer, the day began with Morning Watch. After a noisy, chaotic breakfast in the large, rough dining hall, we returned to our cabins to retrieve our Bibles and a little printed Morning Watch devotional guide. We were told to find a spot somewhere on the grounds, alone—no company, no talking—to observe a fifteen-minute vigil of silence and to read the Bible passage for the day, the brief devotional meditation and prayer. Morning Watch—I pretty much hated it. I could read the Bible passage, meditation, and prayer in about a minute and then be bored to tears for the next fourteen. And then one day, I can remember clearly, sitting on the ground with my back to a tree, being bored to death, thinking about lunch and the softball game and swimming, and for some reason I lay back on the ground and looked up. What I saw stunned me, a sight like nothing I had ever seen before. I don't remember what kind of trees they were—oak maybe. The whole place smelled of pine, so that I think about it every time I encounter the sweet aroma of pine needles. What I saw, back to the ground, looking up into the spreading branches of a tall tree, stunned me. I commend it to you. Try it sometime. Find a tree, lie down underneath it, and look up. Georgia O'Keefe painted it once—a great tree, looking up into it. And Wendell Berry, as good poets do, finds words to capture deep human experience:

Great trees, outspreading and upright,
Apostles of the living light.

Patient as stars, they build in air
Tier after tier a timbered choir,
Stout beams upholding weightless grace
Of song, a blessing on this place

"The heavens are telling the glory of God," the psalmist wrote three millennia ago. "The firmament proclaims God's handiwork." The creation, in all its mystery and majesty, in all its fearful power and intricate beauty, tells us something of the creator. God is revealed in nature. You meet the creator in the creation.

It is an important theme in the Psalter. God is the creator who

stretches out the heavens,
sets the earth on its foundation,
makes springs gush forth and grass to grow,

trees and birds, mountains and wild animals,
and wine to gladden the human heart (Psalm 104)

God's good creation is holy. God's good creation contains within itself the very essence of God. You can see God, meet God, in creation.

Furthermore, in Psalm 24 the psalmist proclaims, creation belongs to God. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." It isn't ours. It doesn't belong to us. The place belongs to God. We are guests—temporary guests, at that. And part of why we are here, part of the reason God made us and put us here, is to manage the place, to be stewards of God's creation. In fact that's our highest calling, our holiest vocation, to manage God's creation.

"The Holy Earth" is a phrase Wendell Berry uses. Berry is a poet, essayist, novelist, who farms in rural Kentucky. He is not happy with what has happened and is happening to the earth and the air and the water. He is not happy with the way agribusiness and industry treat the creation. He will be here on October 4 for a public presentation to which you are all invited.

In a speech he made recently, he said:

Jesus thought he was living in a holy world. . . . Much of the action and talk of the Gospels takes place outdoors: on mountainsides, lakeshores, river banks, in fields and pastures, places populated not only by humans but by animals and plants. And these nonhuman creatures, sheep and lilies and birds, are always represented as worthy of, or as flourishing within, the love and care of God. (*The Way of Ignorance*, p. 135)

When he wanted to make a point about God's providential care, he said, "Look at the birds: they neither sow nor reap." When he wanted to convince his disciples to stop worrying so much about their lives—a bit of advice certainly relevant for people like us who spend most of our time worrying, fussing, obsessing, being anxious about our lives—and to trust God's goodness and mercy, he said, "Consider the lilies, they neither toil nor spin, and yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

Now, a sermon on God in nature could become an exercise in sentimentality or New Age spirituality except for the fact that the way we are treating the place has caused a major crisis—some scientists think a life-and-death crisis. The environmental crisis is, many are now saying, *the* moral issue of our time. And so while this is about your own experience of God in the sacredness of nature, it is also about our responsibility for managing the place in a way that will be life giving and life sustaining for

our children and our grandchildren and for all who will come after us. And on that score we're not doing very well.

Wendell Berry remembers in an essay that in his childhood, "people in my part of the world drank fearlessly from springs and wells and swam without anxiety in whatever water was deep enough. . . . Now we know that water pollution is only a part of a package that includes air pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, urban sprawl, architectural ugliness, and other symptoms of a general disregard for the world's life and health" (*The Way of Ignorance*, p. 69).

For decades, environmentalists have struggled to be taken seriously—dismissed in the political arena as liberal tree-huggers, brushed off in religious circles and the church as peripheral left-wingers, challenged by scientists paid by industry to prove that fossil fuels are not harmful. Environmentalists, backed by hard science, have fought the good and lonely fight. And now, finally, everybody—or nearly everybody—acknowledges that the environmentalists were right all along and are right. We're in trouble environmentally.

In a special cover article on global warming, *Time* magazine observed:

from heat waves to storms to floods to fires to massive glacial melts, the global climate seems to be crashing around us. . . . Scientists have been warning us for decades . . . about pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. . . . Environmentalists and industrialists spent years shouting at one another about whether the grim forecasts were true. But in the past five years, the serious debate has ended. Global warming is the real deal and human activity has been causing it. (3 April 2006)

I don't need to rehearse the statistics. We read them every day. We Americans constitute 4 percent of the world's population and produce 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. We continue to produce and market automobiles that are not fuel efficient and to resist even modest efforts to improve. Environmentalist Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*, quips that when he goes to the supermarket in suburban Boston and sees the vehicles in the parking lot, he concludes that the shoppers must have driven through a jungle, forded flooded rivers, and climbed steep, uncharted canyons to get there.

We burn off 5 percent of the earth's surface, including the trees, which are nature's air-cleansing mechanism, to build and dig and drill and farm and produce more greenhouse gases.

What is new and critical now, *Time* said, was that we thought we had decades or centuries to resolve this mess. "What few people reckoned on

was that global climate systems are booby-trapped with tipping points and feedback loops, thresholds past which the slow creep of environmental decay gives way to sudden collapse.”

So it's time to pay attention. It's time for people of faith, people who believe in the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition of God's holy earth, to wake up and acknowledge what has happened, to understand and accept it as the moral issue of our day, to change the way we think, to demand that our politicians act responsibly, and to make personal adjustments and decisions appropriate to our faith.

Part of the problem we have with this whole matter is that we have been taught not that creation is holy, but that creation is fallen. Part of the problem religious people have with this matter is that we have been taught that the world is the arena of human sin, that to be Godly is to be otherworldly, that the whole point of spirituality is to deliver us from the world with all its temptations and delights, to deliver us from our own bodies, for that matter, and deliver us to the realm of the spirit.

Since Augustine in the fourth century taught that human beings are born in original sin, conventional Christians have not been altogether comfortable with creation, the world, nature, their own humanness, for that matter.

Now Augustine was right mostly, but his is not the only way to think about creation. There is another ancient Christian tradition that affirms the goodness of the creation, the goodness of human beings, which comes, potentially at least, in the image of God in the face of every newborn child.

It is a tradition expressed in Celtic Christianity, which existed alongside of Roman, Augustinian Christianity with its emphasis on sin and the sole redemptive, saving authority of the church. Celtic Christianity adopted much of the symbolism and art and music of ancient Celtic culture, with its emphasis on the sacredness of nature. The high Celtic crosses one sees in Ireland and western Scotland and Celtic jewelry employ interlacing, tracery, which symbolizes not the fallenness of creation, the sinfulness of the world and humankind, but the interlacing of heaven and earth, God and human life.

Pelagius, a fourth-century Celtic theologian, argued with Augustine and lost but said, “The face of God is in the face of every newborn infant.”

In the late 1800s, a Scottish scholar, Alexander Carmichael, became interested in the religious practices of the people of the Western Isles—the remote islands off the west coast of Scotland. He recorded prayers and incantations the people chanted, all day long, virtually unchanged for a thousand years, pure Celtic Christianity. His wonderful collection includes

prayers and incantations for kindling the fire, milking the cow, for herding and sowing seed and fishing, prayers for cooking and the loom, for hunting and reaping, for lying down and rising up, for loving and birthing and dying.

It is a precious Christian tradition that has continued stubbornly over the centuries: the goodness and beauty of creation, the Holy Earth.

This spiritual tradition, based on the holiness of creation, flourished in the twelfth century with Bernard of Clairvoux, whose hymns we still sing and who said, “I have had no other master than the beeches and the oaks.” And Julian of Norwich, who recognized the love and goodness of God in a hazelnut in her hand (see *Leaving Church*, p. 81).

And, of course, Francis of Assisi, writing love poems to creation and the God of creation, with which we began this worship service:

Be praised, then, my Lord God
In and through your creatures
Through noble brother sun
Through sister moon
In brother wind be praised, my Lord
And in the air.
Be praised my Lord, through sister water
And brother fire
Through our dear mother earth.

I like to remember that Jesus knew the psalms and probably had committed most of them to memory. I like the thought that when he looked up into the night sky, the same words came to him as come to me—“The heavens are telling the glory of God.” And that when he walked by the lakeside in the early evening and greeted the fishermen, or when he walked by a field ripe with grain, or when he sipped good wine, ate honest bread, bit into a sweet, delicious fruit, or when he saw a dear newborn, the words that came to him were, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.”

By coincidence, or perhaps divine reinforcement, I found myself yesterday morning sitting on a park bench beneath a tree, holding a six-week old granddaughter; her name is Lilly. I couldn’t help remember Pelagius—“The face of God in the face of every newborn”—and Jesus—“Consider the lilies.”

We believe he came into this world as God’s man, into this very world as God’s love. And when he wanted to tell his friends that God is good and kind and that we can trust God with our lives, he used this world. When at critical times in your life or mine—when we are anxious, worried about the

future, our future; when we are sick, when we are dying, and he wants us to know that we can trust a kind and good God with our lives, even with our deaths—he uses the goodness of the creation where we have always met God, the Holy Earth, the birds of the air and lilies of the field, illustrations, pictures, of that love and kindness and trustworthiness.

That ought to help us understand the holy earth as our home and challenge us to love it and honor it and manage it responsibly, to protect it and hand it on to our children and their children so that they too might one day sing

Mine is the sunlight!
Mine is the morning
Born of the one light
Eden saw play!

Praise with elation,
Praise every morning
God's re-creation
Of the new day!

*We thank you, O God, for this amazing world:
for green trees reaching into your blue sky;
for everything that is natural, holy, earthy, real;
for birthing and growing and living and dying;
for people to love and cherish.
For those who work to sustain and protect it all, we give you thanks.
And for the one whose whole life in this world—
his birth, his life, his death and resurrection—
points to you and your love, we give you thanks. Amen.*